SAFETY ALERT

Subject: Water Safety Trend

The Army is well into the season of water activities, and early indications are that this is likely to be a bad year. Soldiers are drowning at more than double the normal rate, and the hottest months are just beginning. At present, 10 fatalities have occurred. Commanders and senior NCOs can only control this trend by reaching into the off-duty behavior of their soldiers, teaching and enforcing the requirements for safe swimming, boating and use of flotation gear.

This year's drownings were triggered by several activities, but the most frequent cause was small boat accidents. In these seven cases, the soldiers did not plan to enter the water at all, but went overboard from a fishing boat or similar watercraft. Reports on hand only sometimes indicate that life jackets were in use. The other drownings involved SCUBA and swimming in both a pool and open water.

By looking at accident statistics from the last 10 years, a pattern of drowning situations can be determined. In that time, 141 incidents occurred, some involving more than one fatality. The most significant fact is that only 1 death occurred at a pool with Army lifeguards present, while unguarded pools were the scene in 9 cases. By far the most dangerous environment is the open water or shoreline. Lake and river recreation produced 41% of the drowning incidents, while ocean swimming fatalities produced another 16%. Military training operations accounted for 11% of the drownings, however, another 9% drowned subsequent to vehicle accidents. Many times the victim did not intend to enter the water, but managed to either drive or fall in.

Consistent factors in Army drownings include overconfidence in swimming ability, alcohol involvement, and breakdown of the buddy system. In recreational settings, these failures sometimes work together, setting a soldier up for a tragedy. Often the victim was not alone, but no one was able to control the situation or complete a rescue.

Command water safety programs should be targeted on these threats. Requirements for operational risk management, individual training, use of personal flotation devices, and responsible alcohol use must be emphasized. The water recreation areas in your command area of operation should be evaluated using a risk management approach to determine if off-limits prohibitions are warranted. Above all, leaders must recognize their responsibility for the readiness of their soldiers, both on and off duty, and implement controls to mitigate risk and prevent soldier injury or death…The Army's mission depends on it.

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